DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 071 039 CS 000 292

AUTHOR DeStefano, Johanna S.

TITLE Register-Social Variation in Language: Implications for Teaching Reading to Ghetto Black Children.

PUB DATE Apr 71

NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Reading Assn. (16th, Atlantic City, April 19-23, 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29

DESCRIPTORS *Elementary Grades; Ghettos; Language Fluency; *Language Patterns; Language Proficiency; Language Skills; Language Styles; *Negro Dialects; *Negro Students; Nonstandard Dialects

IDENTIFIERS *Language Instruction Registers

ABSTRACT

This study investigated how much of the Language Instruction Register (variation in language in different social situations) black-vernacular speaking children had acquired by grades one, three, and five. A sentence repetition task was devised which contained selected Language Instruction Register forms having black ghetto vernacular semantic equivalents. One hundred-eighty Black students in ghetto area schools, were asked to repeat each sentence immediately after hearing it. One of the major findings was that approximately two-thirds of all the responses made by the ghetto black children on the sentence repetition task were Language Instruction Register responses. In first grade, fifty-six percent of the responses were made in the Language Instruction Register forms. By fifth grade, slightly over seventy percent of the responses made to sentence repetition tasks contained Language Instruction Register forms such as "I don't have any," instead of the vernacular equivalent "I ain't got none." The data seem to indicate a steady increase in acquisition of certain forms within the Language Instruction Register. (Author/WR)

ED 071039

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Dr. Johanna S. DeStefano
Faculty of Early and Middle
Childhood Education
The Ohio State University
29 W. Woodruff
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Register - Social Variation in Language: Implications for Teaching Reading To Ghetto Black Children

Research Reports
4:00-5:00 P.M.
Thursday, April 22, 1971

The Problem

During the last decade, educators have been paying increasing attention to ghetto black children's reading problems about which there is little question as to their urgency. "Reports from city after city with substantial numbers of economically deprived black children have indicated that reading achievement is well below the national norms." (1, p. ix) The urban black ghetto communities themselves, including adults, display more functional illiteracy than any other socio-economic or definable minority group in the United States who speak English natively.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Johanna S. DeStefano
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

CS 000 292

Register: A Useful Concept

Several suggestions as to probable causes for these reading problems have been made by linguists. Labov and Robins (5) suggest that cultural factors rather than language factors account for much of the failure by blacks to learn to read. The theme of cultural differences is being researched more now. Other linguists and educators advance language factors as being major contributors to black reading problems. Whatever research reveals the relative weightings of these factors to be, there is one socio-linguistic factor which must be taken into consideration.

This factor can perhaps be best explained by calling attention to the fact that everyone speaks in different ways to different people. There is the teacher who says to her first graders "Did you children see the little daffy-dawn-dillys peeking up to see the sunshine?" but who would not dream of saying that to the principal or to her fellow teachers. She would probably say something like "Mr. Fussbudget, did you notice that the daffodils are above the ground?" Furthermore, it is entirely probable she would not even discuss such a topic with the principal.

> ... most linguists will agree that a speaker of any language will make linguistic adjustments to specific social situations. These adjustments in phonology, grammar and lexicon will range anywhere from the obvious adjustments between adults and small children to the more complicated sociolinguistic switching between school, home and playground talk. (3, p. xi)

This variation in language from one social situation to another is known as register. Registers are distinguished from one another by form: phonology, syntax, and vocabulary.

How might register enter into ghetto black children's reading problems? Often these children speak, at home and with their peers, a social dialect of English called Black English or black ghetto vernacular. This vernacular has been described as being different in systematic ways from surrounding middle and upper class speech, and contains various registers which reflect the different social uses of language within the ghetto. Consequently, the urban ghetto black child comes to school in command of various registers in the black ghetto vernacular. He knows how to talk one way at home with his parents and another way with his playmates. But he probably does not yet know how to talk to the teacher who uses various registers of classroom English and often expects the black child to use them as well. These classroom registers share many of the characteristics of middle and upper class English locally spoken.

Probably one of the most important classroom registers used by the teacher and expected of black vernacular speaking children is what this author calls the Language Instruction Register. This register is used by the teacher when she is giving some sort of language instruction such as a reading or, spelling lesson. Examples of the teacher's speech would be: "There are three <u>desks</u> in a row. Spell <u>desks</u>." or "Halloween is a time to wear <u>masks</u>. This is how

masks is spelled." At other times when she is not concentrating on language, she probably says "Move your dess around in a circle." or "Put your Halloween mass away." But since a black ghetto vernacular speaker usually says masaz or desaz, already the phonology of his registers does not correspond to the phonology of the Language Instruction Register. The black vernacular speaking child also has syntactic forms in his registers which differ from those in the Language Instruction Register. One example would be "I ain't got no pencil." in the vernacular registers corresponding to "I don't have any pencil." in the Language Instruction Register.

Implications of Register for Teaching Reading

What do these differences in registers mean for the reading teacher? The black vernacular speaking child has to make correspondences between the forms he already controls, both receptively and productively, and the forms found in the primers as well as those used in reading instruction by the teacher. These differences in forms may be most curcial for beginning literacy instruction during which the child is supposed to learn how to "crack the code." However, given the continuing reading deficiencies faced by ghetto black children, teachers in the upper elementary grades also need information on whether or not black children have made the correspondences between the forms of the various registers.

The reading teacher also needs to be able to ascertain for a given black vernacular speaking child just how much of the Language

Instruction Register this child already controls receptively and productively. It is obviously a waste of time to work on making the child aware of equivalencies between his vernacular and the Language Instruction Register forms if that child already has made the correspondences with forms in his vernacular. Unfortunately, many people assume that when a child says "I ain't got none.", he uses a multiple negative 100 percent of the time, so has not made the connection with a more standard form. Research has indicated this is not the case; only the perception is categorical, not the use. The black child may have certain Language Instruction Register forms under control for the situations in which they are used, but discard these forms in other classroom situations. The teacher needs to be aware if the child does show this differential usage. Secondly, the black vernacular speaking child may comprehend the Language Instruction Register forms but not produce all of them. This receptive control is important in reading instruction because it forms the basis for comparison between the child's vernacular and the teacher's and book's forms. But it is more difficult to demonstrate than productive control.

Practically speaking, if the teacher is aware that some children control most of the forms found in the Language Instruction Register she uses, she can turn her attention to those children who need more help to make the correspondence between forms they control in the black ghetto vernacular and the forms used by the teacher in the Language Instruction Register. Both information on individual usage

and group patterns is important to the teacher to help her better plan her pedagogical strategies for the teaching of reading. The teacher who consciously helps her pupils gain control over the forms of the Language Instruction Register is undoubtedly a more effective teacher than the one who is not aware of the kinds of differences between her speech and the black vernacular of her students.

Children's Acquisition of LIR

The basic question, then, is how much of the Language Instruction Register have black vernacular speaking children acquired when in school. In a study (2) the author conducted in Oakland, California, with black children, this was the question asked. To help answer it, a sentence repetition task was devised which contained selected Language Instruction Register forms having black ghetto vernacular semantic equivalents. 180 Black students in grades 1, 3, and 5, attending Oakland ghetto area schools, were asked to repeat each sentence immediately after they heard it. Although there are other ways of studying the acquisition of various registers, this specific task was chosen for several reasons. One was that repetition tasks are frequent pedagogical devices, especially in school testing situations. Another was that such a task sets a fairly formal speech context for the child which hopefully would induce him to "put his best linguistic foot forward," in other words to use as much of the Language Instruction Register he could. Also a sentence repetition task could be devised

by teachers themselves and used as an individual diagnostic tool right in their classrooms to help them ascertain the levels and patterns of the Language Instruction Register acquired by black vernacular speaking children. Finally, a repetition task usually elicits the black vernacular semantic equivalent from the child if he does not make a Language Instruction Register response. The response data give the teacher valuable information as to the specific forms the child does use, and information about the fact that the child's responses are patterned and not haphazard. Also, if a child responds to the Language Instruction Register form with the black vernacular semantic equivalent, it is assumed he comprehends the more standard form at least in some sense. Thus a minimal comprehension check could be run very quickly by a teacher.

Results of the Study

One of the major findings was that approximately 2/3 of all the responses made by the ghetto black children on the sentence repetition task were Language Instruction Register responses. In other words, under formal language instruction conditions, black children in grades 1, 3, and 5 demonstrated productive control by making a majority of responses in the Language Instruction Register forms. Even in first grade, 56 percent of the responses were made in the Language Instruction Register forms. By fifth grade, slightly over 70 percent of the responses made to the sentence repetition task contained Language Instruction Register forms such as "I don't have any." instead of the

vernacular equivalent "I ain't got none." The data seem to indicate a steady increase in acquisition of certain forms within the Language Instruction Register.

However, one must be careful not to let overall percentages mask the differing levels of acquisition of certain Language Instruction Register forms. In this study, certain forms such as the negative verb with indefinite pronoun as in "I don't have any." showed a very high level of acquisition even in first grade which made only a 5 percent vernacular response, e.g., "I ain't got none." By fifth grade the double negative vernacular response was virtually nonexistent. In fact, by grade 5 the majority of the linguistic forms studied demonstrated Language Instruction Register responses of 80 percent or higher.

Conversely, there were several forms which even by grade 5 demonstrated very low levels of Language Instruction Register acquisition. The two lowest were: 1) l articulated in such words as he'll and we'll, in other words the contracted form of he will; and 2) -sks and -sts (consonant clusters) articulated in such words as masks and ghosts. By grade 5, only slightly over 5 percent of the total responses were articulated ls, and even fewer were the articulated -sks and -sts. Reading teachers should be aware these are two forms linguists feel could cause reading problems because of their absence in black children's speech. Labov (4) claims that black vernacular speaking children may have trouble reading 'll because the sound l in that position does not function in their speech. The consonant cluster was mostly reduced in

the black children's responses to mas and ghos. Such a realization creates sets of homonyms like masks - masses - massed. These sets which do not correspond to the Language Instruction Register pronunciation of the teacher may contribute to a "loss of faith" in the alphabetic code, especially if the teacher views the mas pronunciation as a "mistake" and tells the child he is not reading correctly. She is not helping him cope with his speech differences when they conflict with learning the Language Instruction Register. The black child has more and different sets of homonyms to cope with than are present in the Language Instruction Register, especially as pronounced by a teacher instruction beginning readers. This child is faced with acquiring another register, or probably another set of registers. So the teacher needs to plan strategies designed to help the child become aware of the differences between Language Instruction Register forms and the forms in the black vernacular. But to plan these strategies, the teacher needs specific information as to the levels and patterns of Language Instruction Register acquisition for each black vernacular speaking child in her class. This present research study represents only a beginning in collecting this needed data for the teacher of reading.

Bibliography

1. Baratz, Joan C. and Roger W. Shuy (Eds.), Teaching Black Children to Read. Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969.

2. DeStefano, Johanna S., "A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Productive Acquisition of a School Language Instruction Register by Black Children." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1970.

3. Fasold, Ralph W. and Roger W. Shuy (Eds.), Teaching Standard English in the Inner City. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970.

4. Labov, William, "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Nonstandard English." Teaching Black Children to Read. Edited by Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969.

5. Labov, William and Clarence Robins, "A Note on the Relation of Reading Failure to Peer-Group Status in Urban Ghettos," The Teachers College Record, 70 (Feb., 1969), 395-405.